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ABSTRACT

For over 15 years, the Dean for Educational Services at Jefferson Community College (New York) has regularly identified and written to students whose mid-term grades indicated that they were in potential academic jeopardy. During fall 1988, a study was conducted to measure the effect of this intervention strategy on grades and persistence. Of the 106 students who received two or more F's, Incompletes, or Y's (abandonment grades) at mid-term, 54 were sent a letter explaining the significance of their grades and encouraging them to consult with their advisor or division chair or to complete the formal withdrawal process if they did not intend to complete the semester. Study findings included the following: (1) half of the students who received the letters and half of those who did not acted upon their mid-semester grades by exercising the college's course withdrawal option or by improving their grades; (2) the students who received the letters had a higher number and ratio of withdrawal grades than those who were not contacted; (3) among students who did not withdraw, both groups showed similar final grade distributions; (4) both the students who received the letters and those who did not had significantly more Y grades at the end of the semester than at mid-semester; (5) students who received the letters had a 61% fall-to-spring persistence rate, while those who did not had a persistence rate of 44%; and (6) of the 106 students in academic jeopardy at mid-term, 50 received letters of academic censure at the end of the semester. (AYC)

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ED305961

A RESEARCH REPORT ON THE

FALL 1988 MID-TERM DEFICIENCY FOLLOW-UP PROJECT

Frederick J. McCarthy
Dean for Educational Services
Director of Institutional Research

Jefferson Community College
Watertown, New York

March 1989

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JC 890 183

Jefferson Community College
Watertown, New York 13601

A Research Report on the Fall 1988 Mid-term Deficiency Follow-up Project March, 1989

by

Frederick J. McCarthy, Ed. D.
Dean for Educational Services &
Director of Institutional Research

BACKGROUND:

For over 15 years, the College's Dean for Educational Services has regularly identified and written to JCC students whose mid-term grades would suggest that they were in potential academic jeopardy. The program was initially developed in partial response to a Middle States review that supported strengthened counseling and advisement services at the College.[1]

This intervention program was also developed to be consistent with an important monograph on Student/Faculty advising at the time[2] and on the need (cited by the American Council on Education nearly 40 years ago) "to achieve a higher degree of integration between student personnel services and instructional programs..."[3]

The objective of contacting these at-risk individuals has been to promote both student success and its corollary, institutional retention. Based on many years of experience, some 100-150 JCC students (8-12%) will be involved in this process during any given semester.

Research at other institutions tends to support "early warning" systems as having "...a positive effect on student academic performance..."[4] In this same context, a Miami-Dade Community

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[1] The Role of Counseling Services at Jefferson Community College, A Report Prepared for the Middle States Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, September 1974, pp. 17-18.
[2] Hardee, Melvene, "Faculty Advising in Colleges and Universities," Student Personnel Series No. 9, American College Personnel Association, Washington, D.C., 1970.
[3] Ibid., p. 9.
[4] Roueche, J.E.; Baker, G.A., III, Access & Excellence: The Open Door College, Community College Press, Washington, D.C., 1987, p. 81.

College self-study has been quoted as indicating that "it is important to notify students by mid-term if the student's academic performance is not satisfactory."[5]

Evaluation of the efficacy of this JCC program to date has been informal and has been primarily based on the intuition of those involved with the effort as well as general anecdotal feedback from the College community (including faculty, staff, students and student family members). In the only formal review of this activity, a spring 1988 survey found that two-thirds of the students receiving these letters were positive about the process.[6]

The number of mid-term at-risk students who were identified in this process over the past three fall terms and their subsequent spring enrollment status (expressed as a percentage of the full group) is presented in Figure 1., FALL AT-RISK STUDENTS PERSISTING 'TIL SPRING.

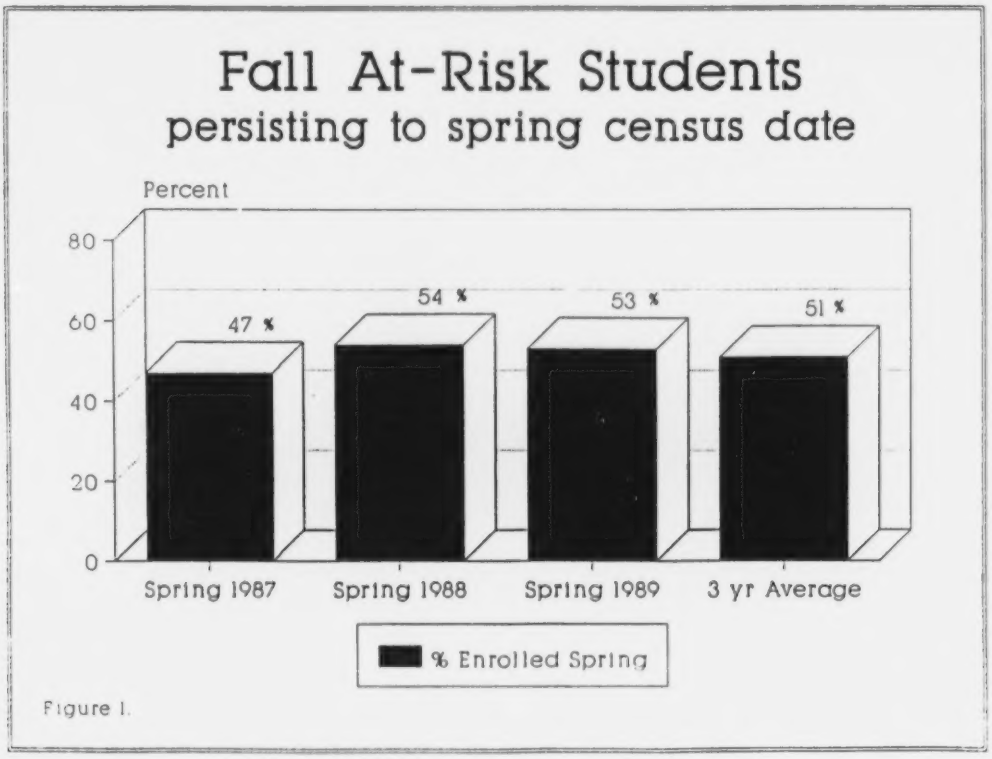

Figure 1.

[5]Ibid., p. 81.
[6]McCarthy, Frederick J., Mid-term Deficiency Follow-up, (Institutional Research Report #2), Jefferson Community College, October, 1988.

Figure 1. shows that approximately half of the fall at-risk group returned for the following spring semester. Retention rates for fall to spring semesters for 1986 through 1988 are 47%, 54% and 53%, respectively, for a three-year average of 51%.

During the fall 1988 semester, a pilot study was developed to help measure the effect of this program on mid-term to final grades, in general, and on overall persistence at the College, in particular. This paper presents a review of this mid-term intervention activity.

MID-TERM GRADE DISTRIBUTION:

As noted earlier, JCC's procedure for mid-term grade distribution has been in place for many years. Since these grades at the College are "informal and/or unofficial," students obtain their mid-term reports from their faculty advisors; mid-term grades are not mailed to the student's home address. The rationale for this method of distribution has been to force-or at least encourage-student/faculty contact in the process. It is felt that this activity presents a propitious time frame for appropriate discussion, planning or referral. Additionally, this furnishes students the option of whether or not they wish to share their mid-term grades with significant others.

In direct contrast to the above, students who have been identified as at-risk have an individually-prepared letter about their mid-term grades sent first-class mail directly to their homes. (The student's grade report itself is not mailed out but it continues to be available in the academic advisor's office). The procedure for this mailing is outlined in some detail below.

IDENTIFICATION OF AT-RISK STUDENTS:

Following the release of mid-semester grades, students having earned a combination of two or more targeted delinquent grades are divided into three groups. (Group 1: two or more Failure's and variations; Group 2: two or more Incomplete's; Group 3: two or more Y's-JCC's designation for "abandonment grades".) Letters are mailed to the student's local address extending the support services of the College; a response form is included, giving students viable options for improving their academic outlook. It is noted that these letters are forwarded to students without regard to their full-time or part-time status; the sole criteria is that the individual has two or more questionable grades.

The attached three sample letters and student response form (Appendix items A through D) constitute the normal operating procedure for this special mid-term intervention activity. In addition to receiving a copy of this letter at their homes, students learn of this program through their faculty advisors who have been alerted as to which of their advisees have been contacted. The arrival of this letter in the home mail may also give it extra significance.

By writing to students at their homes, the College is advancing its message of caring about them and offering its full arsenal of services. An underlying principle of this system is felt to be consistent with the observation offered by Dr. Vincent Tinto that continuing on-campus interactions "...serve to remind individuals not only that they are a part of a college community, but also that the community is concerned with their welfare."[7] Since the majority of JCC students live at home, this procedure frequently brings other family members into the process where they might otherwise be uninformed.

THE FALL 1988 INTERVENTION STUDY:

Following the release of fall 1988 mid-semester grades, 106 students having earned some combination of two or more F's, Y's and I's were identified. Collectively, these 106 students garnered 280 targeted at-risk grades. The appropriate follow-up letter (see Appendix items A thru D) was prepared for first-class mailing to each of these students.

To create experimental and control groups for this study, the entire deck of letters was assembled in alphabetic order and alternate letters were then mailed or withheld; a total of 54 letters were mailed representing 130 targeted grades and 52 letters were withheld representing 150 targeted grades (one control group letter was mailed at a parent's request).

At the close of the semester, final fall 1988 semester grade reports for these 106 students were analyzed for each sub-group along with mid-semester data. In addition, each student's end-of-semester status (withdrawal from College, academic dismissal, or probation) was reviewed. Finally, at the start of the spring 1989 semester, enrollment reports were examined to determine fall-to-spring student persistence.

PRELIMINARY ASSUMPTIONS:

As noted above, the overall objective of the mid-term follow-up program has been to help students in satisfying the academic requirements of their courses and to help the College with student persistence. Secondary objectives have involved helping at-risk students to be knowledgeable of the wide array of support services offered by the College (tutoring, financial aid, health services, academic and personal counseling, job placement, etc.), of academic procedures (i.e., the procedures for making up incompletes, official course and College withdrawal), and of

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[7]Tinto, Vincent, Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition, The University of Chicago Press, 1975, p. 167.

academic advisement. In addition to feeling better about themselves, it has been felt that students who are well advised and informed of the many alternatives available to them may be in a better position to benefit from the JCC experience.

In general, it has been felt that this program has helped in reducing attrition and promoting retention. Student/faculty interaction has been fostered, and at-risk students have been informed of academic and personal options available to them. Students find that the College cares about them and, to some extent, family members become involved. As noted above, a clear majority of the students receiving these letters report positive attitudes about the process.[8]

This project was designed to determine at a general level whether students contacted, as opposed to those receiving no special intervention, would exhibit:

* Fewer F, Y, and I grades (alternatives for improvement cited and official withdrawal procedures known along with specific time parameters).

* More W grades (alternative to above where passing not possible).

* Higher rate of completion of the fall 1988 semester.

* Greater ratio of persistence from the fall to the spring semester.

FINDINGS:

Figure 2. FALL 1988 GRADES OF AT-RISK STUDENTS presents the mid-term and final grades assigned to the 106 individuals included in this study. Accumulatively, there were a combined total of 280 W, F, Y and I grades at mid-semester and 301 such grades at finals.

It is clear that both the experimental and control group students acted on their at-risk mid-semester grades. While it is noted that the data in this series are gross tallies and, as such, do not deal with changes in specific course grades from mid-term to finals, it would appear that students exercise the College's course withdrawal option or otherwise improve these grades.

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[8]McCarthy, op. cit., p. 2.

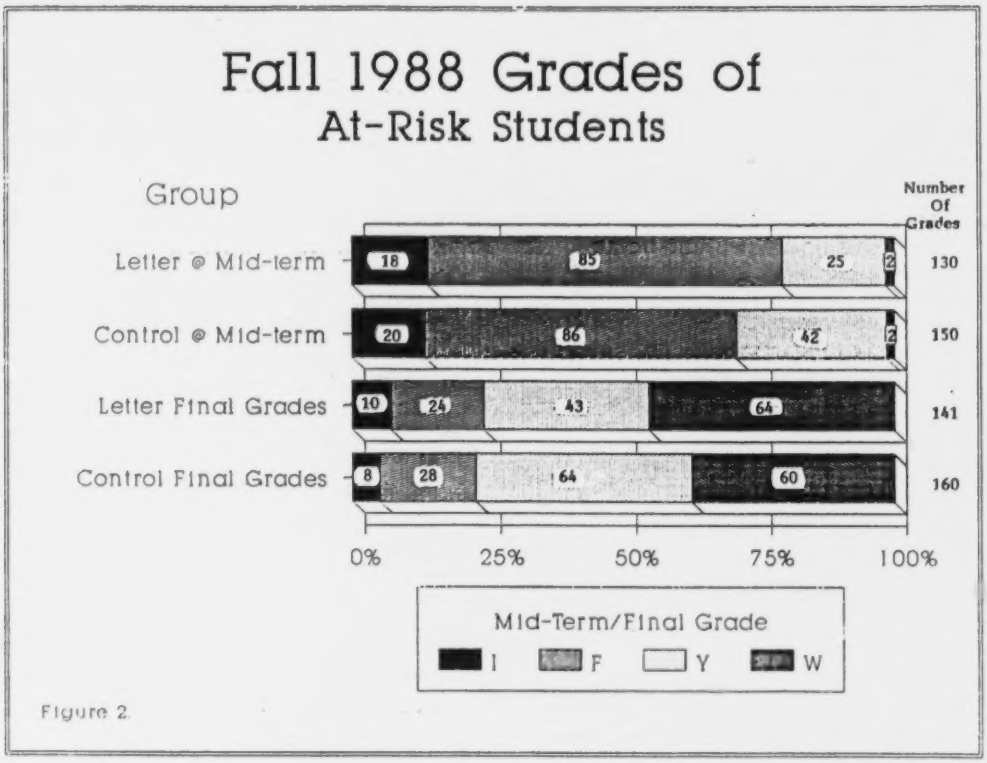


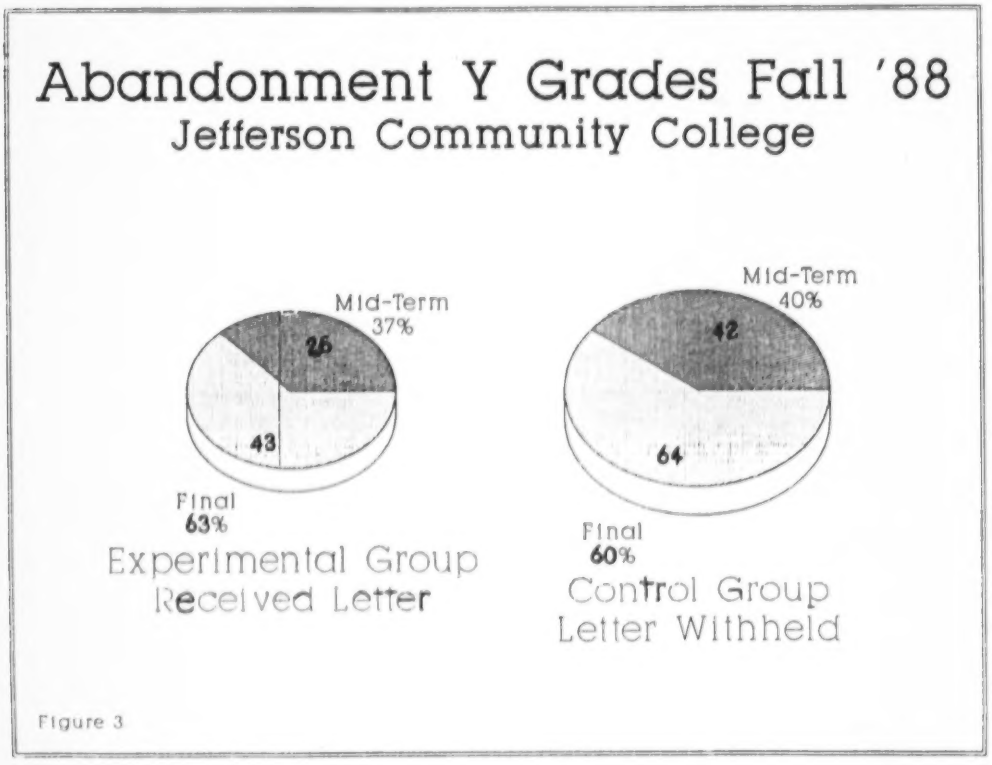
Figure 2.

While the ratios of I, F and Y grades for the two groups are very similar, the experimental (letter) group had a higher number and ratio of withdrawal-"W"-grades than those who were not contacted in this project. The theory that this intervention project would result in more "W" grades for the "letter group" is tentatively accepted, subject to further statistical review.

The hypothesis that the experimental and control group final grades of I, F and Y would be different from one another is rejected as the two groups show very similar final grade distributions. Both groups significantly reduced the number and ratio of their I and F grades between mid-semester and finals and both groups apparently exercised the option to withdraw from these courses where it seemed appropriate to them to do so.

For reasons unexplored and unexplained in this study, the number and ratio of Y grades for both groups between mid-semester and finals increased markedly. As is shown in Figure 2., the ratio of abandonment grades increased from 19% to 30% for the experimental group and from 28% to 40% for the control group.

Figure 3., ABANDONMENT Y GRADES, was constructed to examine this grade phenomenon in more detail.



Both the letter and control groups had significantly more abandonment grades as finals than they received at mid-semester. On a relative basis, both groups display very similar ratios; of all Y grades that each group received, 37-40% were as mid-terms while this increased to 60-63% as final grades. It is noted that each pie in Figure 3. combines both the mid-term and final Y grades of the respective group; the combined number of Y's in the experimental pie is 65 while there are 106 such grades in the control pie.

Figure 4., SPRING 1989 RETENTION & ATTRITION OF FALL 1988 AT-RISK STUDENTS displays this information on a ratio basis for both the letter and control groups. The hypothesis that the "lettered" group would show a greater ratio of persistence from the fall to spring is strongly supported by the findings in this display.

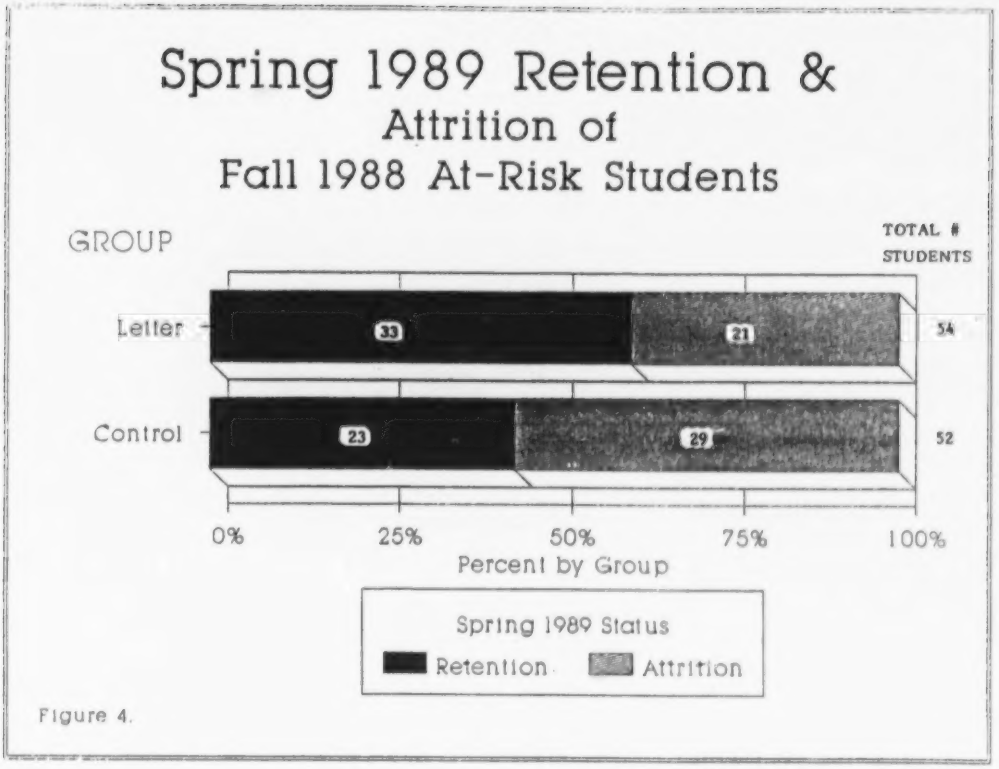


Figure 4.

Figure 4. shows that the letter group of 54 students had a 61% fall-spring persistence rate while the control group of 52 individuals had a persistence rate of 44%. Expressed from the point-of-view of attrition, 39% of the group who received mid-term intervention letters did not return in the spring, while a majority (56%) of the students in the fall control group failed to register for the spring 1989 term.

As part of this study, records were maintained on the receipt of responses from students who had received deficiency letters. This information is displayed in Figure 5., RESPONSES TO FALL 1988 AT-RISK LETTER.

Of the 54 letters mailed out, 14 (26%) individual responses (mail, phone, in-person) were recorded in the Dean for Educational Services Office; of these 14, 11 students (79%) were persisters in the spring term. Undoubtedly, the high rate of retention for respondents deals with their tolerance for dealing with the system and a predisposition for general follow-through with administrative requirements.

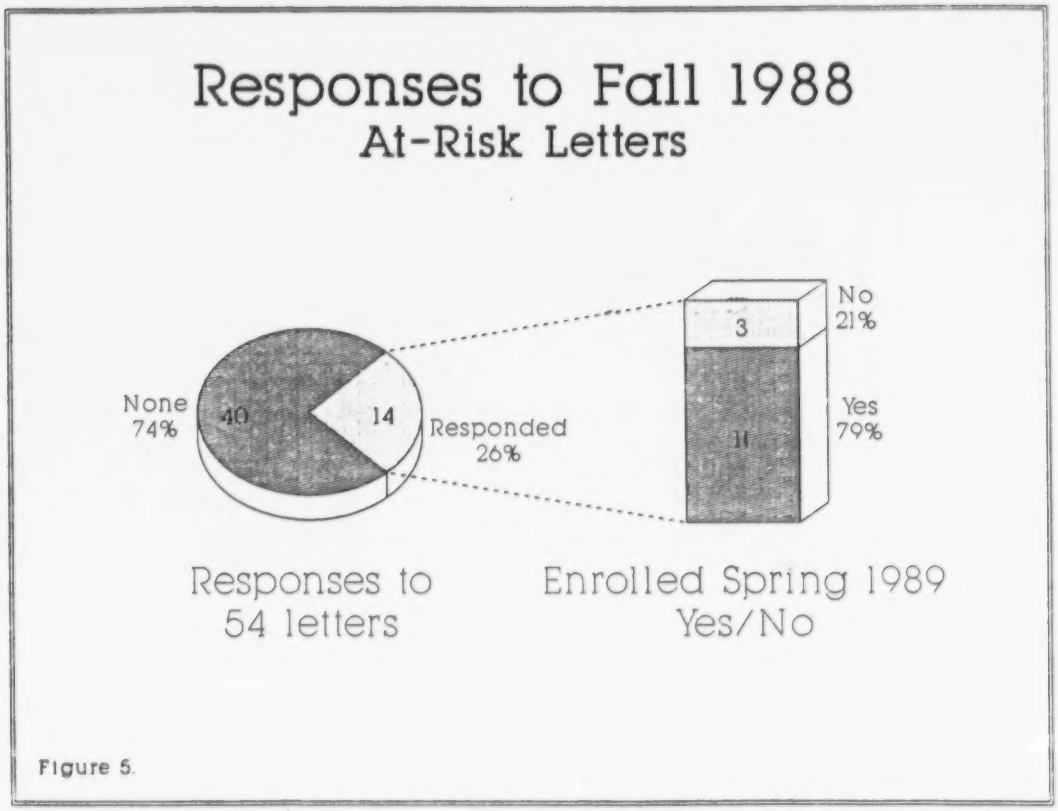


Figure 5.

Several sub-areas of this study dealing with end-of-semester student status produced numbers that were too small for meaningful statistical review. On the one hand conclusions based on these data should be seen as somewhat speculative. From another point of view, this information may be suggestive of general trends that could be reviewed in more detail over a longer period of time, with a larger population or by combining several semesters of experience and should therefore be reported.

Information in this area is presented in Figure 6., RETENTION & ATTRITION BY STATUS: FINAL FALL 1988 ACADEMIC STANDING below as well as in Appendix Table 1.

At the end of the fall 1988 semester, of the 106 within this study group, 50 students completed the term without academic jeopardy; 71% of the lettered and 62% of control students in this area returned for the spring 1989 term.

Due to their failure to maintain a minimum cumulative honor point index, a total of 50 students received letters of academic censure. For the fall term, 27 students were subjected to academic dismissal (27% of the lettered and 6% of control

students returned for the spring); 23 students were placed on academic probation (92% of the lettered and 60% of control students returned for the spring).

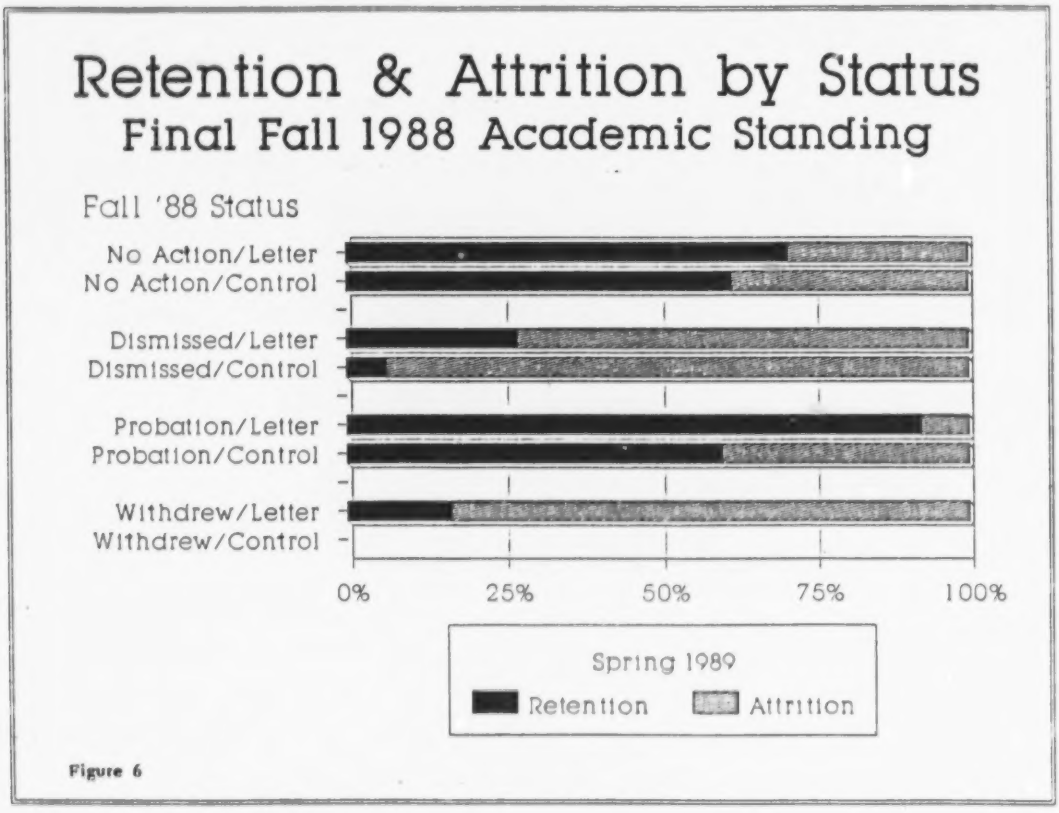


Figure 6

An additional 6 individuals voluntarily withdrew totally from the College before finals week. Interestingly, all 6 withdrawals were by people who had received a mid-term advisory letter and there were no formal withdrawals within the control group. One of these six (17%) re-enrolled for the spring 1989 semester while the other 5 maintained their withdrawn status.

DISCUSSION:

The College's fall mid-term at-risk grade intervention project appears to be meeting its general objective of improved retention into the spring term. Additionally, after being advised of various alternatives, a significant number of the students receiving these letters follow the College's procedures for official course withdrawal during the time between mid-terms and

the 65th[9] instructional day of the semester (the last date for official course withdrawal). The process seems to be helpful to and supported by those involved.

A number of at-risk students are apparently unaware, unable or unwilling to follow official course withdrawal procedures and they ultimately receive final letter grades of Y in these courses. Since the Y grade is counted as a F in honor point calculations, the significance of the grade is important in student planning and progress. This is clearly a punitive grade that is earned by and assigned to students as much for what they have done as for what they haven't done.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

* 1. As an early warning or intervention system, the mid-term deficiency follow-up project appears to be working. It is recommended that this activity be continued and, possibly, further refined and studied. There is currently approximately a 10-14 day turnaround time between the assignment of mid-term grades and the distribution of this letter. It is suggested that this activity become further streamlined and that the letter be distributed as quickly as possible.

* 2. Within the context of reexamining and streamlining the mid-term grade intervention project, it is suggested that it may be worthwhile to target first-time, full-time students independently from the entire at-risk population. To date all targeted groups have received identical follow-up action. While the theory has yet to be tested, it is felt that the retention and satisfaction yield from a more tightly configured intervention activity may be more productive than the blanket approach used to date.

* 3. The College's current time frame for non-punitive course withdrawals should be maintained. Mid-term grade reports become available to students on approximately the 40th day of instruction and the counseling, advisement and intervention strategies that take place occur over the following 2-5 weeks. Contacted students in this study show significantly higher fall-spring persistence rates than those in the control group.

* 4. While it is not directly addressed in this paper, it is possible that mailing mid-term grades to the student's home (along with a form note about possible alternatives where the student seeks improvement?) would be helpful. Other alternatives in the distribution of these reports might also

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[9]The Role of Counseling..., op. cit., pp. 4-5.

be explored. It is known that many students fail to pick up their mid-terms grades while others are passed out by support staff if the student's academic advisor is unavailable at the time the student is seeking the report. This clearly could be the subject of an additional study.

* 5. The high frequency and ratio of at-risk students receiving abandonment grades are worthy of further examination. Possible intervention or warning strategies for potential Y's could be developed or improved where they are already in place. It is recommended that the Y grade and its overall implications be reviewed.

*6. This study should be replicated for the spring 1989 semester. Continuation of this research for one semester will provide information on the efficacy of this program for spring-fall retention and will provide a base for future comparison.

*7. The College should implement its planned establishment of a formal and comprehensive student data base management system (DMB). This should include Structured Query Language (SQL) and Query by Example (QBE) capabilities. Incorporation of a DBM capabilities will facilitate student tracking in general and future retention research in particular.

SUMMARY:

While a direct "cause and effect" relationship is not asserted, there appears to be a correlation between student success and persistence for those at-risk individuals who are contacted through the College's mid-term intervention program. This study of the long-established mid-term grade follow-up project is generally supportive of this intervention activity and, by inference, its continuation. Suggestions are advanced for further improvements in this specific activity in the recommendations section of this report.

SAMPLE "F" LETTER

JEFFERSON COMMUNITY COLLEGE
WATERTOWN, NEW YORK 13601

OFFICE OF THE DEAN FOR
EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

October 26, 1988

As a result of several midterm grade deficiencies that were recently reported for you, I am writing to offer any assistance that my office can provide. It is not my intent to intrude but rather to offer you the many services of the College. In the event that you haven't already done so, I recommend that you consult with your academic advisor or division chair to consider the implications of your current grades.

If you have been sick or unable to attend classes for some other reason, you may still wish to complete all or some of the courses for which you are registered this semester. On the other hand, if you are no longer attending the College and have not officially notified the Registrar, I strongly recommend that you complete our official withdrawal procedure.

My point is to insure that your permanent transcript for this semester not jeopardize you at some future date in potential employment, transfer to other colleges, etc. Also, in the event that it may affect your plans for next semester, you should be aware that under state and federal law, students must maintain good academic standing to receive state and/or federal sponsored financial aid.

I would appreciate it if you would complete the enclosed form and return it to me at your earliest convenience.

Very truly yours,

Frederick J. McCarthy, Ed.D.
Dean for Educational Services

FJM/jc
Enclosure

c: Registrar's Office
Advisor

(APPENDIX A)

SAMPLE "Y" LETTER

JEFFERSON COMMUNITY COLLEGE
WATERTOWN, NEW YORK 13601

OFFICE OF THE DEAN FOR
EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

October 26, 1988

As a result of several midterm "abondoned" grades that were recently reported for you, I am writing to offer any assistance that my office can provide. It is not my intent to intrude but rather to offer you the many services of the College. In the event that you haven't already done so, I recommend that you consult with your academic advisor or division chair to consider the implications of your current grades.

As you may already be aware, the "Y" letter grade is assigned when a student abandons a course or fails to withdraw properly. The grade is counted an "F" in the honor point index calculations.

If you have been sick or unable to attend classes for some other reason, you may still wish to complete all or some of the courses for which you are registered this semester. On the other hand, if you are no longer attending the College and have not officially notified the Registrar, I strongly recommend that you complete our official withdrawal procedure.

My point is to insure that your permanent transcript for this semester not jeopardize you at some future date in potential employment, transfer to other colleges, etc. Also, in the event that it may affect your plans for next semester, you should be aware that under state and federal law, students must maintain good academic standing to receive state and/or federal sponsored financial aid.

I would appreciate it if you would complete the enclosed form and return it to me at your earliest convenience.

Very truly yours,

Frederick J. McCarthy, Ed.D.
Dean for Educational Services

EJM/jc
Enclosure

c: Registrar's Office
Advisor,

(APPENDIX B)

SAMPLE "I" LETTER

JEFFERSON COMMUNITY COLLEGE
WATERTOWN, NEW YORK 13601

OFFICE OF THE DEAN FOR
EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

October 26, 1988

As a result of the "incomplete" midterm grades that were recently reported for you, I am writing to offer any assistance that my office can provide. It is not my intent to intrude but rather to extend to you the services of the College. If you have not already discussed this matter with your faculty advisor or division chair, I encourage you to do so immediately.

As you may already be aware, an "incomplete" is a non-penalty temporary grade given where a student is unable to complete work for unusual circumstances. Since you received several incompletes at mid-semester, I want to be certain that you are working to fulfill your course requirements for the semester before finals. Also, you should know that course grades of "I" that are not completed within 60 days following the end of the semester automatically become "F" grades unless an extension has been granted.

If you have been sick or unable to attend classes for some other reason, you may still wish to complete all or some of the courses for which you are registered this semester. On the other hand, if you are no longer attending the College and have not officially notified the Registrar, I strongly recommend that you complete our official withdrawal procedure.

My point is to insure that your permanent transcript for this semester accurately reflects your achievements and not jeopardize you at some future date in potential employment, transfer to other colleges, etc. Also, in the event that it may affect your plans for next semester, you should be aware that under state and federal law, students must maintain good academic standing to receive state and/or federal sponsored financial aid.

I would appreciate it if you would complete the enclosed form and return it to me at your earliest convenience.

Very truly yours,

Frederick J. McCarthy

FJM jc
Enclosure

Frederick J. McCarthy, Ed.D.
Dean for Educational Services

c: Registrar's Office
Advisor,

(APPENDIX C)

Sponsored by Jefferson County - Supervised by State University of New York

Dear Dean McCarthy:

_____I have talked with my instructor(s)/advisor about my midterm grade deficiencies and am working to improve them now.

_____I am continuing my studies at JCC this semester and need no assistance through your office at this time.

_____I am no longer attending JCC. Please send me an official withdrawal form (Monday, November 28, is the last day to withdraw from a course without penalty; Monday, December 5th, is the last permissible day for withdrawal from the College).

_____I plan to complete one or more courses this semester but will be withdrawing from some classes. Please send me a course withdrawal form through the College Center student mailboxes.

_____I plan to stop in or phone you to talk about this on a more personal basis.

_____Comments:

_____
Student Signature

PLEASE CHECK APPROPRIATE RESPONSE(S) AND RETURN PERSONALLY OR BY MAIL.

FJM/jc

(APPENDIX D)

JEFFERSON COMMUNITY COLLEGE
WATERTOWN, NEW YORK 13601

OFFICE OF THE DEAN FOR
EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

October 26, 1988

To: Academic Advisors

From: Frederick J. McCarthy,
Dean for Educational Services

Subject: Midterm follow-up

As most are aware, my office regularly sends follow-up letters to students whose midterm grades suggest that they might benefit from utilization of one or more of the College's support services.

While the Fall '88 series of letters is now in the mail, there is a significant change from past practice. During this term, I am conducting a "mini-study" regarding this process; to establish a control group, I have withheld half the letters I would normally have sent.

In keeping with this process, I recently sent 53 letters to students who received two or more "questionable" midterm grades. By category, 44 "F" letters, 7 "Y" letters, and 2 "I" letters were forwarded by first class mail to the student at the home address.

A copy of the letter sent to each of your advisees and a copy of my requested response from the students are attached. Please let me know if you have any questions regarding this project.

FJM:pwh

Attachments

c: President Henderson
Members Academic Conference

(APPENDIX E)

Sponsored by Jefferson County - Supervised by State University of New York

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Appendix
Table 1.
RETENTION & ATTRITION by FINAL FALL 1988 ACADEMIC STANDING

Action Status	Retention	Attrition	Total	Retention %
Letter No Action	17	7	24	71%
Control No Action	16	10	26	62%
All No Action	33	17	50	66%
Letter Dismissed	3	8	11	27%
Control Dismissed	1	15	16	6%
All Dismissals	4	23	27	15%
Letter Probation	12	1	13	92%
Control Probation	6	4	10	60%
All Probation	18	5	23	78%
Letter Withdrew	1	5	6	17%
Control Withdrew	0	0	0	0%
All Withdrew	1	5	6	17%
Study Total	56	50	106	53%

(APPENDIX TABLE 1)